

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone,

We have already discussed Bhārat Mātā, or Mother India, as a national symbol. We saw that the idea of the nation as a mother—shown clearly in the image of Bharat Mata—brought people together during the Indian freedom struggle. Like in the song “Vande Mataram,” the mother figure stood for the country, whose honor had to be protected. In a society where men were seen as protectors of women, defending the motherland became a way to show courage and duty. This image helped people from different castes and religions feel united. Bharat Mata made the idea of the nation more personal and emotional, turning the fight for freedom into a shared mission to protect and care for a beloved mother. Now, let us consider another significant concept—language as mother. This discussion will be happening specifically in the context of Tamil language. This lecture is primarily based on the section titled “Language as Mother” in Partha Chatterjee’s book “The Truths and Lies of Nationalism.” If you want to know more about Tamil Nationalism you can also read Sumathy Ramaswamy’s famous book “Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India.” If you want to know more about Tamil language, a book that I can suggest is Tamil: A Biography. I have borrowed ideas considerably from all these works. Without much ado, let us begin our lecture.

Tamil is one of the world’s oldest living languages, with a literary tradition that spans over two millennia. It belongs to the Dravidian language family and is predominantly spoken in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, in Sri Lanka, and among the global Tamil diaspora. Tamil is recognized as a classical language by the Indian government, owing to its ancient origins, rich literature, and continuous usage. The earliest records of Tamil can be found in inscriptions from around the 2nd century BCE, and its classical form is best represented in Sangam literature, a vast body of secular poetry composed between 300 BCE and 300 CE. This literature captures themes of love, war, governance, and ethics, reflecting a highly developed society and aesthetic sensibility. Tamil plays a vital role in preserving cultural identity among its speakers. The most famous Tamil text, as you all know, is the Thirukkural, which was written by Thiruvalluvar. It’s a series of brief poems on how to lead a good life. It does not speak of any single religion, so everyone across all faiths—Hindus, Muslims, Christians—claim it their own.

In Tamil nationalism, individuals do not think primarily in terms of land or religion, but of language. The language Tamil is not merely considered a language to be spoken. Conversely, it is conceived as a mother, Tamilttāy, who cares, loves, and needs to be respected and guarded. This concept has been seen in numerous songs and poems. Sundaram Pillai, in his famous play Manonmaniyam, makes prayers to Tamilttāy. Manonmaniyam is often regarded as the first modern Tamil drama. Named after its heroine, Manonmani, the title translates to “Madness of the Mind.” Manonmani, considered the first modern Tamil play, tells the story of Princess Manonmani, the only daughter of Jeevakan, the Pandya king. Jeevakan rules his kingdom with the wise guidance of his spiritual advisor, Sage Sundara, whose influence stirs jealousy in the king’s chief minister, Kudilan. With no son to inherit the throne, Kudilan hopes to secure power by marrying his own son, Baladevan, to the princess. When Sage

Sundara leaves on a pilgrimage, Kudilan takes advantage of his absence to gain more control over the king and push his own plans forward. At the same time, Manonmani dreams of a noble king, Purutottaman of Travancore, and falls in love with him. Coincidentally, Purutottaman also dreams of Manonmani and comes to see her as his ideal partner. Kudilan starts a war between the Pandya kingdom and Travancore. He secretly uses a hidden tunnel in the palace to sneak away and join Purutottaman, hoping to gain favour with him. But Purutottaman, who dislikes betrayal—even when it benefits him—has Kudilan arrested and put in chains. Later, Purutottaman uses the same tunnel to enter the Pandya palace, arriving just in time to stop Manonmani's forced marriage to Baladevan. When Manonmani sees the man from her dream standing before her, she is overjoyed and garlands him, choosing him as her husband. Peace is restored to the southern region of India, which Sundaram Pillai, the author, beautifully describes as the “Dravidian land.” Through this play, Pillai also foreshadows the ideas that would later shape the Dravidian Movement.

The song “Niraarum kadal udutha” which is a two-stanza verse taken from the play is now known as the Tamil Thai Vazhthu or the Tamil Anthem. So powerful has been Pillai's iconic imagery that the song has become the official Tamil anthem, and there stands a statue of Tamil Thai in Madurai and her temple in Karaikudi. The anthem presents Tamil as the divine and eternal presence. She is personified as a young goddess whose beauty and influence permeate the land and the world. The land of Tamil is portrayed is also depicted as a joyful maiden, lavishly decorated by the teeming sea, emphasizing its scenic splendor and natural beauty. The cultural and spiritual significance of the land of Tamil is emphasized by comparing it to a tilaka, a mark of beauty, on the Indian subcontinent's forehead. It is said that the aroma of this tilaka, which symbolically embodies Tamil culture, fills the world with wonder and joy. This imagery implies that Tamil is a universal aesthetic force that can evoke awe and devotion rather than merely being a regional language or culture. Tamil is praised for its purity, freshness, and eternal youth, which represent its spirit of renewal and its timeless literary richness. The passionate tone of the poem inspires a strong sense of respect, pride, and affection for Tamil, presenting it as a living, breathing deity worthy of constant adoration rather than just a language.

Later poets like Bharathidasan also mention Tamil as mother and say serving her is equal to serving one's parent. Initially, poets such as Subramania Bharati envisioned Tamil to be included within a broader Indian identity. But as the anti-caste and Self-Respect movements gained prominence, individuals started to emphasize Tamil's autonomy from Sanskrit and Hindi. The anti-Hindi agitation further cemented this even more. The icon of Tamiltāy turned into a symbol in political movements rather than merely in poems. Even now, the concept of Tamil as a mother is extremely strong in Tamil Nadu. It is employed to show affection for the language and pride in Tamil identity.

As with Bengali, Marathi, and Hindi, Tamil also had its initial instance of literary nationalism. But strangely enough, it was the Tamil language, and not the land which was worshipped as the mother goddess Tamil nationalism. The concept of India as motherland entered Tamil for the first time in the early-twentieth century in the poetry of Subramania Bharati. Bharati was moving across India extensively, visiting Congress meetings, and advocating the independence of India from British clutches. In one of his poems, he implied that the Kurukshetra war was the Indian freedom struggle where the Pandavas were Indians today struggling for their rightful cause against the Kauravas who, like the British, had usurped power. The concept of India as motherland entered Tamil in the early-twentieth century via the poems of Subramania Bharati. Bharati travelled all over India, attended Congress sessions, and spoke on behalf of the freedom of India from British rule. In one of

his poems, he offered the opinion that the Kurukshetra war was the Indian freedom struggle in which the Pan-davas were similar to Indians of today fighting for their rightful rights against the Kauravas who, in a manner similar to the British, had occupied power.

But by the 1920s, the anti-caste movement, led by the Justice Party, severely attacked the official brand of nationalism. It criticized that the mainstream form of nationalism is an effort to exercise Aryan domination over the Dravidian populations of southern India. The Justice Party which was in opposition to the Congress demanded that the colonial government should give greater representation and reserved employment to non-Brahmans. But here we should remember that the cultural aspect of the movement was much more influential. Maraimala Adigal, the champion of a neo-Shaiva religious revival in the Vellala caste, spearheaded the movement for pure Tamil without Sanskrit terms. You will see that this was the linguistic renovation, in a direction precisely opposite to what was followed by Hindi, Marathi, or Bengali, where Sanskrit terms were borrowed or invented to create a new vocabulary adequate for contemporary administrative, scientific, and philosophical discourse. The literature, speech, and performance generated within the Dravidian movement eschewed Brahmanical Tamil of the nineteenth century and returned to classical Tamil sources to craft a new language of the public. The Pure Tamil Movement mainly focused on replacing common Sanskrit words with new words made from Tamil roots, both in everyday speech and in writing. Over time, it also tried to create new words for modern fields like science, technology, and government. But in the end, the movement wasn't very successful—just like the Young Turks in Turkey, who tried to remove Arabic and Persian influences from the Turkish language.

The key figure of the Dravidian cultural movement based on Tamil language and culture was EV Ramasamy, or Periyar. The word Periyar literally translates to "the great elder leader." He was the leader of the Self-Respect Movement, which vehemently opposed practices like untouchability. The movement also focused on preventing child marriage and favored widow remarriage, love marriage, and marriage between individuals of different castes and religions. Notably, he dissuaded couples from temple weddings and instead had them register their marriages legally. EVR's denunciation of upper-caste domination was much more intense. He propagated a far different conception of what it was to be Tamil. He thought upper-caste dominance in the Tamil country was much like the way the Aryans asserted that they were racially superior to the Dravidians and Sanskrit was imposed upon Tamil. EVR urged people to shed religious rituals, which he considered superstitions. He was a firm rationalist and an atheist who openly criticized religion. But he did not merely talk—he acted. He went to villages and towns, sometimes with his younger colleague Annadurai, where he set copies of the Manusmriti on fire and encouraged people to believe in rationality and scientific temper as opposed to religion.

The anti-Hindi movement gained further strength after independence when there were efforts to substitute English with Hindi as the national language of the nation. The context to this was the political demand made by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), established by Annadurai and Karunanidhi in 1949, to create a separate federation known as Dravida Nadu. During the anti-Hindi protests of the 1950s, the focus on language turned the movement into one of Tamil pride and nationalism. Tamil Thai was portrayed as the desecrated and threatened mother. Both EVR and Annadurai exhorted to denounce Hindi which, they claimed, symbolized Aryan hegemony. The protests during the anti-Hindi agitation were serious. People incinerated photocopies of the Indian map and the Constitution. In a few cities, shops belonging to North Indian businessmen were vandalized. In 1964–65, thousands

marched onto the streets chanting slogans against Hindi. There were numerous arrests, and a minimum of ten people even set themselves ablaze. The conception of Tamil as the mother language of a Tamil nation left no room for Indian nationalism. This feeling captured the heart many Tamils. That was made amply evident in 1967, when Annadurai-led DMK ousted the Congress party from power at the state polls. Two years later, by law, the state came to be known formally as Tamil Nadu, or "Tamil country." But the call for a separate dravida nadu, independent of Indian union did not last long. Later, the DMK also decided to remain within the Indian system, accepting the Constitution and participating in elections. Subsequently, M.G. Ramachandran (MGR), having parted ways with the DMK, titled his party the All India Anna DMK to demonstrate that it stood for something beyond Tamil interests. Although Tamil nationalism, based on language, today exists as a part of the Indian nation, it does so by negotiating the terms with the Indian state.

In conclusion, a strong emotional and cultural connection to language as identity is reflected in Tamil nationalism's fervent embrace of Tamil as a mother figure. The intricacy of linguistic history and cross-cultural interactions is also revealed by initiatives like the Pure Tamil campaign, which aimed to preserve and purify the language. The metaphor of Tamil as "mother" has affirmed the language as a dynamic, ever-evolving symbol of belonging while also igniting pride and influencing political ideologies. However, the entwined histories of Tamil and Sanskrit serve as a reminder that shared heritage is where linguistic richness lies and that cultural purity is frequently a myth. The anti-Hindi agitations of the 20th century marked a significant turning point in the assertion of Tamil identity. For many Tamils, this was a question of cultural sovereignty rather than just language. Tamil was presented as the language of the people and the spirit of Tamil Nadu during the intensely emotional protests, while Hindi was perceived as an encroachment by the North. Long-lasting political changes resulted from these movements, such as the emergence of Dravidian parties that supported regional autonomy and Tamil pride. Scholars and cultural activists have frequently claimed that Tamil is as old as Sanskrit, if not older, in order to uphold the language's prestige. Traditional sources such as the Sangam literature, which some claim predate 300 BCE, make mention of Tamil's ancient history. With an uninterrupted literary tradition spanning more than two millennia, Tamil is frequently referred to as a classical language. This claim to age is not only a source of cultural pride but also serves as a counter-narrative to the dominant Sanskrit-centric history of Indian civilization. Tamil nationalism positions the language as a repository of age-old knowledge and a living example of the South's profound contributions to Indian heritage by highlighting its rich literary and philosophical heritage.